

The Ties That Bind

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Summary: The Wolkenritter are safely behind bars, and many people want to execute these legendary doom-bringers immediately. But Admiral Leti Lowran is among those who want to see the Wolkenritter give something back to society, and she has taken it upon herself to convince the public that they are more than killing machines. To do this, she needs the help of a very special teacher.

The Ties That Bind

"Yes, Admiral Lowran? You wished to see me?"

"Thank you for coming to my office, Yuuno Scrya. Please, have a seat." Leti Lowran's icy expression warmed just a little as he obeyed with trepidation. "Relax, Mr. Scrya, you are not in any trouble."

"O-oh," he sighed, relaxing somewhat.

"Rather, there is something with which I would like you to help me, as a personal favor."

His faced scrunched up mildly in thought. "Is there something in the Library you need me to find? I'd be happy to help, but you probably need to make a formal request to the Chief. He keeps me too busy during work hours to let me do private research, and practically chases me out when my shift's up."

Unconsciously, he pouted, and Leti hid a smile behind her customary cold expression. She'd heard from Lindy how the young scholar chafed at only being able to work part-time for the Infinite Library. Allowing a nine-year old child to fill a full-time position went strictly against the TSAB's child-labor laws, especially when that child wasn't recieving financial compensation equal to his unique and priceless contribution.

Besides, the TSAB was already technically breaking their own laws in employing him at all without the expressly-given consent of his legal

guardians. The Scrya Clan had been unreachable since they left Administered Space on their last expedition over a year ago, and no one could be sure when they would return.

The library's staff, Leti and others waited with concern against the day that they might lose Yuuno's services until the day he became of majority, assuming he decided to return to the Library at all. But that was a problem for another day, and so she set it aside to concentrate on today's issues.

"Invaluable as your current services are, Mr. Scrya, those are not the skills of which I have need." Bulldozing ahead to cut off any further mis-guesses, she changed the subject. "Are you familiar with the most basic difference between the Midchildan style of magical combat and that practiced by the knights of Ancient Belka?"

He winced, perhaps flashing back to memories of his own recent, violent encounters with the Wolkenritter. "Lethality."

Others might have said "range". But while it was true that the body of techniques developed in the Midchildan style emphasized long-range combat whereas the Belkan style emphasized close-range engagement, it was merely a cultural trend, not an inherent restriction.

Being an exception to this trend himself, and personally knowing other exceptional individuals of both styles, Scrya could look past that and recognize the true difference.

He elaborated: "The Ancient Belkan style was developed by and for knights to use in mortal combat, as part of the Belkan Empire's war efforts to conquer first the entirety of their home world, and then all other worlds they could reach, while holding and defending their territories against rebellions and other invaders.

"But the Midchildan style was specifically designed to render opponents unconscious, without serious injury. It marked the ideological shift away from the military bearing of previous nations and the acceptance of the Time/Space Administration Bureau's policing methods of protection and peace-keeping."

"Correct. Rather than soldiers, we field enforcers of the law. Our principal opponents are not soldiers of enemy nations, but criminals who violate the local laws of the Administered Worlds or the federal laws of the Bureau as a whole. As such, we seek to subdue and arrest suspects that they might live to face a court of justice.

"In keeping with the times, those families and communities that continue to teach Belkan style magic have adapted Midchildan spells for their own use. Abandoning the traditional squire-hood of Ancient Belkan training, practitioners of the Modern Belkan style are mages like any Midchildan stylist.

"Even those vanishingly few souls still raised and trained in the traditions of the Ancient Belkan knighthood are required by law to learn the most basic Stun Bullet or Ring Bind. Those who join the armed forces and especially the enforcers must exhibit higher mastery of nonlethal spells.

"But the Wolkenritter are warriors from another time. I need your help to bring them up to date."

Yuuno blinked. "Wait, what?"

Leti leaned on the left arm of her chair. "As with your friend, Fate Testarossa, the Wolkenritter and their mistress consented to mage rank evaluation tests to better inform their sentencing. Captain Hallahoun and I hoped that by clearly detailing the Wolkenritter's strengths and weaknesses, we could begin to create an accurate picture of Wolkenritter within the minds of others. To dispel the fearful belief that they are unstoppable monsters whom need to be immediately destroyed. At the same time, to show people how useful the Wolkenritter would be as assets.

"We knew going in that they probably wouldn't score very well on the 'long-range magical damage attack' tests. We were not surprised that none of them could manage a Stun Bullet. But the tests also revealed something that we had never really considered before."

She waved a hand through the air, conjuring holographic screens depicting the Cloud Knights in action.

"The support knight, Shamal, made the most passable attempt at capture-type magic. Though she has no spell at all like Ring Bind, her Device's strings are capable of a full-body bind against a human-sized target at close range. She can attempt the same at long range by using her Window of Travel portals, but that requires using one pair of rings to create the portal, leaving her only half the threads to actually attempt a bind. As an alternative, she can use her wind-manipulation magic to enclose an opponent within a small vortex, but only a target too fearful to brave the spinning air would remain caught; simply stepping into the flow would throw one out. They'd be hurled away, but free."

A wave of her hand cycled a different screen to prominence. "The Guardian Beast, Zafira, achieved the next most successful results. His skill with the Steel Yoke spell is admirable, such that he can usually guarantee safely capturing a stationary target within the blades without piercing them or inflicting more than superficial cuts. However, he cannot provide satisfactory results against moving targets, and even once he's captured a target, he cannot prevent them from struggling hard enough to injure themselves upon the blades. His only alternative is to physically grapple with a target in his human or wolf forms, which is not acceptable no matter how fast, strong or tough he is."

Another wave, another screen. "Their leader, Signum, failed completely. While she displays remarkable skill at unarmed combat and the willingness to employ vicious joint-locks, she isn't as good as the familiar in that respect. Her primary capturing ability is the snake form of her Armed Device, and unlike Steel Yoke, she cannot avoid inflicting potentially fatal injuries to her target even when avoiding the use of fire."

She sighed, and brought a hand to her forehead. "The hammer knight fared worst of all. She simply has no way at all to incapacitate a suspect without blowing out their eardrums with that howling spell, or breaking all of their limbs. While she's stronger and hardier than her body would suggest, she has neither the strength, weight or the leverage of the guardian beast. Successfully grappling a target barehanded requires her to break bones and dislocate joints."

She pinched her nose. "Also, as the TSAB must keep public relations in mind, it must also be noted that her attempts appeared highly indecent and entirely too comical, given her apparent age... aside from being frightfully brutal. It is not the image of a proper Administration field agent." Far too much wild jockeying for position on top of - or underneath - grown men, with much pulling of clothes, grabbing for sensitive male organs, and biting.

She banished those thoughts and refocused her eyes on Yuuno, who had been listening diligently with an increasingly tense and pale expression. He swallowed, and said, "So, you want me to teach them binding spells."

"Indeed. And perhaps also the basics of Midchildan shooting magic, if you can manage."

"Not that I'm saying 'No' - I'm flattered, really - but, why me? There have to be other Bureau mages who are better qualified. Better teachers or binding specialists. I can't possibly be the best choice for this."

Leti raised her eyebrows in disbelief. Did this child not understand? The possibility offended her.

"Young Scrya, how many A-rank, aerial-combat capable mages do you think are enlisted with the Bureau?" She stared directly into his widening eyes. "Further, how many do you think have proven themselves capable of casting Caging Circle on the scale that you managed?" She leaned forward in her seat. "I'll tell you now, few among them have shown the inclination or ability to teach, and fewer still have shown such results as your instruction of Ms. Takamachi."

She continued, determined to impress the reality upon the child's mind. "I'm well aware of your reports regarding her prodigal talents in the realm of shooting magic, and your own meager ranking in the same. But the fact remains that you took what you did know, and used that to teach and guide a total novice to become even better than you in that field. No one can ask for more than that in an instructor."

She set her elbows on her desk, settling her full upper-body weight on her arms as she clasped her hands together. "I am not in the habit of explaining myself to anyone but my superiors, Mr. Scrya, so listen well.

"In fact, there is not anyone more qualified to provide me this favor. If there were, you would not be sitting here.

"You are among the few people in the world who do not believe the Wolkenritter to be monsters hell-bent on murder and mass-destruction. You have actually engaged the Wolkenritter personally in combat and managed to come out unscathed when most others ended up in the medical ward, and you have also fought beside them. Having spoken with them personally, believe me when I say you have earned some degree of their respect.

"You are the same age as their current mistress, who has expressed an interest in getting to know the other mages her own age who helped save her and the warriors she calls her children. You have also spent

considerable time on her home planet, becoming familiar with her culture, which is also the culture that the Wolkenritter themselves have been immersing themselves in for the past half year."

The tightness around her eyes told her that she was now glaring full-force at the Scrya boy, who watched her like a small, frightened animal. "And believe you me, Mister Yuuno Scrya: Any of the rare, aerial-combat capable, support specialists more skilled than you, with more teaching experience and proven results, are already hard at work at their current assignments as part of their full-time jobs, and their superior officers will not gladly loan a single one of them to me for such a controversial task as this.

"And no, I cannot ask Ms. Takamachi or Ms. Testarossa. They are currently busy pursuing public education on Earth, and when they are not doing that, they will be attending their own training courses. Whereas for the foreseeable future, the only demands on your time are your part-time job with the Infinite Library, outside of which you are on record as feeling listless and bored.

"By the unique combination of every possible factor I can consider, you are exactly the person I need to do this."

She closed her eyes briefly, leaned back in her chair, and brought her entwined hands before her mouth. In a gentler tone of voice, she asked, "So do you now, perhaps, begin to understand the weight of the favor I am asking of you?"

He stared back without a word.

"Mr. Scrya?"

He started, as though snapping awake. "Yes! Yes, ma'am! I, uh, I understand, ma'am. Sorry. Thank you?"

Again, she suppressed a smile, though her eyes became slightly warmer. "Will you do this favor for me, Mr. Scrya? Or do you wish some more time to think before giving your answer?"

He looked down, frowning in thought, before looking back up. "No. No, I'll do it. If there's really no one else... I'll do it."

"Thank you. I'm not asking for results nearly as amazing or fast as with Ms. Takamachi. While passing the tests before their trials are over will certainly have a favorable impact on the sentencing, all I really need from them are signs of significant progress. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Again, I thank you. ...Oh, and one last thing."

"Yes?"

"You do realize that, since you are already employed in one part-time position, as a minor you cannot legally be hired for another?"

"...Yes?"

"That means you will not be paid for this job."

At the sight of his lengthening face, she finally allowed herself a smile. "That's why this is a favor, you see. Dismissed."

End
file.